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Virtual Community: Forming of Virtual Communication Channels in Higher Educational Institutional Corporation

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Results of philosophical research devoted to studying of virtual communities are considered in article. The author gives an example effective cooperation in virtual communities these are virtual communications in scientifically-educational sphere – higher education web-sites, professional forums, teleconferences. Studying a phenomenon of virtual communities (philosophical position) has allowed to reveal increasing value of this work and open participation of people in modern virtual communications.

Keywords: virtual community, virtual reality, information environment, communications computer network, interactivity, science and educational sphere.

Point

Nowadays the virtual world is interpreted by researchers as a free-standing social reality featured by special psychological, semeiotic, normative, and managerial aspects. The key prerequisite for investigation of any phenomenon, not excepting the virtual communities, lies in a philosophical approach: laws of social development rule not independently as abstract forces, they become apparent through actions of concrete individuals and principles of interaction established in their communities. Each new virtual community entered upon life in the virtual medium is deemed to be not only a generalized entity with the already established social and cultural interactions but rather a potential territory where new forms and relations can be formed.

It should be observed that the virtual communities are studied from different points

of view. One investigate it as a social and psychological phenomenon, while others study it as a bearer of managerial problems. The third explore the phenomenon proceeding from dynamic characteristics of the virtual world development. In the majority of cases we are dealing with the applied searchings. At present the analytical and philosophical researches that include not only description of the phenomenon but also the underlying reasons are uncommon. Hence, there is no doubt that the virtual communities should be investigated in the all-inclusive manner.

The paper dwells on all-inclusiveness in looking up a methodology or means to study the virtual communities at the philosophical level. The proposed level allows linking two fundamental principles of the virtual communities world exploration:

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- consider the virtuality as representation of common cultural regularities;
- define an ability to create images of the world and an individual permanently as the key feature of the virtuality.

Example

The information evolution in communication gives the floor for new forms of the social interactions based on the compatible systems of technological interaction. Integration of the telecommunication and communication means guarantee remote access and immediate exchange for the data, sound and audio images. The new communication medium created conditions for establishment of the virtual relations and links between people.

Mastering the new communication medium, people tend to establish new collective forms of interaction for professional, individual purposes or the psychological comfort. It is the practice to call «social communities appeared on the basis of technological interaction systems» (Ivanov, 2002, p. 205) the virtual communities. The virtual community phenomenon lies in the possibility to realize the intensional data exchange and to control with the account for the global discourse into the world of computer-mediated technologies.

Even by mid-1990-s there were ten thousands of virtual communities all round the world. Mostly they were formed spontaneously at the peak of the natural interest to the new communication technologies of remote access. And step-by-step the stable communications have generated around the definite interests and groups.

When formulating the definition for *virtual community*, many scientists treat for it from the position of the network communications. For example, the virtual encyclopaedia suggests the following interpretation: «A virtual community is a relatively stable system of links and relations between users of the information network

formed in the course of synergy» (Wikipedia, 2009). Let us consider one more of the commonly used definitions. «Network communities are groups of people with the fixed membership that interact predominantly in the global computer networks» (Melyukhin, 1999, p. 36). In this case the emphasis is put on steadiness of links and relations between members of the virtual community.

In paper of H. Rheingoldand, a well known American ideologist of informationalism, the term *virtual community* is defined as «a self-organizing electronic network of interactive communications integrated around common interests or purposes» (Rheingoldand, 1998). The definition does not contain any reference to usual communication subjects – an addressee or an addresser – at the same time it is featured by the comprehensive approach. The Rheingoldand's definition has felicitous combination of technological, motivational, and corporative factors needed to describe organizational features of the *virtual community* phenomenon. H. Rheingoldand fairly denotes the self-organizing aspect in cooperation of different persons interests and entities using electronic forms of communication. This does not mean that all virtual communities can be self-reproduced, nevertheless, as it is fairly noted the organizational aspect is the main in their life.

Shcherbina V. operates with the term *cybercommunicative communities*. The author prefers another way of looking into peculiarities of the virtual communities formation, stating that the main goal of the internet communication «a unity of free personalities» formation. (Shcherbina, 2001), capable to withstand pressure against the gregarious social structures that are built on principles of coercion and suppression (military, political, economical, psychological or ideological).

Shcherbina V. emphasizes the mass communities appeared in the network environment – *cybersocieties*, *virtual*, *online*, *cybercommunes* (Shcherbina, 2001) – are not socially autonomous. They should be viewed as successors to the conventional social groups which are built up by members of information and analytical, commercial, science entities.

As D. Ivanov reveals, virtualization can be applied to a community since it blends with «context of relations typical for the virtual reality» (Ivanov, 2002, p. 62). It gives the ground to define the network community from the position of three characteristics of the virtual reality:

- possibility to have active interactions between objects and subjects of the virtual worlds featured by conditional character (objects are artificial and variable);
- ephemerality – freedom in entry/ exit makes it possible to break and restore bonds;
- immateriality of action (an image produces effects typical for the material).

Resume

Thus, the comparative analysis of different approaches in definition of the *virtual community* phenomenon shows that the term in its chief features corresponds to the typical characteristics of *a community* (communion, commune). The only aspect defines its new meaning. The matter concerns methods and technologies of communication. The virtual communities are formed on telecommunication principles. This, in its turn, make us assent to introduce an attribute of deterritoriality as a requisite. The community relations are conventionally established within a geographically circumscribed entity of people. A method of localization of the intragroup relations in the virtual community is not similar. As M. Kastels states, «in the modern society the logics of location makes way for the network logics»

(Kastels, 2000, p. 92). The real space for those communicating via network is annihilated at the expense of electronic forms of remote access. The idea about local interaction among members of a community is altered as the modern communication technologies ensure locality not on a local but the global scale. Hence, the attribute of deterritoriality serves one of the key requisite in definition of the *virtual community*. After the term features are defined and the key attributes are marked out, we will try to reveal prerequisites for formation of the virtual communities.

Point

A psychological capability of an individual «to assume role of another» and to fancy how he is perceived by a communication partner, is admitted the most significant feature of interaction and successful development of the social environment within the virtual space. Interaction between members of the virtual community becomes the background for formation of the individual and grouped identification system.

Many researchers pay their attention to the fact that the virtual community is formed as a specific method to combine professional, educational, cognitive, research interests. The approach is not new. It supplements and evolves the basic principles of the theory of interests (The theory of interests was created by scientists R.Parry, D.Parker (the USA), F.Tennant (England) in 1920s. The authors asserted that value of subjects or events for a person is governed by a subjective attitude towards them, the personal interest. The interest is understood as a conscient or inconscient desire, favour/aversion, proneness, sympathy/antipathy, love/ hatred felt by people. The main feature of such interpretation of the social phenomena is the fact that interests are socially conditioned by the life style). Many of its theses can be applied to study establishment of communications within the virtual communities.

Example

Splitting into small groups permits us to ignore the fixed stereotypes and pass on to formation of local cultures on the basis of narrow marginal aspirations and interests. French researchers G. Delaise and F. Gvattarie denoted the type of communities *tribal cultures* (Delaise et al., 1998) that possess their own tribal psychology and integrated at the level of the grouped solidarity.

Many authors consider the Network as the virtual space to realize more open and comfortable relations between people. However, studies of Ye. Belinskaya show that interactions in the virtual communities are directed not to openness but rather to reproduction of the structural integrity on the ground of similar wishes, interests, ideals and values. It can be noticed that the idea of realization of an interest in the network communication is supplemented with a set of requirements to be met in order to form the steady virtual community.

As it has been observed by some researchers, communications in the virtual medium are characterized by ephemerality (fleetingness) of relations. It is due to changes in interests of people and their attitudes towards the psychological peculiarities of the virtual communication. In so doing, a question arises whether the ephemerality will be one of the key characteristics, when we are dealing with the stable virtual unity? In action communications between members of separate forums, chats, teleconferences (science, professional) can grow into the long-term and effective relations and the members can also maintain personal and business bonds in real life. Experts point out that the grouped virtual communication begets a special subspace with its own psychological, cultural, linguistic, and etiquette norms. It assigns some features to interactions in real life. In this case statement that the ephemerality is one of the key attributes

in study of the virtual communication will be unjustified.

A. Krockner and M. Weinstein pay attention to the problem of the so called «lonely (virtual) crowd» (Galkin, 2004). In their point of view the technologically generated community proficiently masks the human loneliness. The problem of emotional poverty distinctive for the modern culture is referred to the category of traditional themes in the present-day humanities: P. Sorokin, E. Dürkheim, R. Maerton, E. Fromm, etc. The overwhelming majority of social contacts are utilitarian, and their arguments are functional. The deep singleness and impoverishment of the emotional life provoke stresses. It is possible to create a corporative resource but members of the corporation will utilize it in the utilitarian way, never allotting it with communicative or interactive functions.

Communication in the virtual community plays the compensatory role. It is most likely that computer communications provide tools to settle more prosaic problems like the possibility to promote oneself or the corporative image, to keep in touch with concrete people, to keep abreast of the world's news and events, to be aware of specific information, etc.

The system possesses one more important element. The point at hand is the necessity to cooperate by the target experience (e.g., corporative sites of the institutes of higher education). When studying the target purposes of users entering the virtual community, it is customary to mark out specific groups of purposes.

- *Instrumental targets* are oriented to handle the professional, economical, educational needs.
- *Terminal targets* are connected with the communication process itself: experimentation with a new form of communication out of interest, familiarization with a new identity

and methods of self-presentation, establishment of social relations dissimilar to others and design of new communities.

The creative factor steps forward no less significant for exploration of the virtual communities formation features. The Internet «traverses a path from particularly professional communication medium for programmers to the medium of frank communication, cognition and play, bringing about wider personal interests» (Zhichkina, 2000, p. 77). The aspect is reported in papers of Ye. Belinskaya, A. Zhichkina, V. Nesterova, etc. The researchers highlight that «computer-mediated communications are close to the well-known practice of the role training» (Zhichkina, 2000, p. 77).

Demand for self-expression, development of different communicative scenarios, search for methods of self-identification are the motivational factors in development of different forms of the internet communication. As stated by many scientists, when creating a virtual community, the individual creates the virtual identity that is manifested in real occupations of those who ranked themselves among the community. That is why specialists have to develop the classification categories and detect typology of the virtual communities by analogy with the existing typologies or on the basis of personal observations.

There is no tried out purposive mechanism of the virtual communities formation at different levels. In many ways the process of their formation passes accidentally. Nevertheless, the fragmented programs realized in reality with the account for possibilities of different forms of the computer-mediated communication, give the ground to divide separate trends for coordination of the virtual communities activity:

- Coordination by the target purpose (professional, educational, research,

hobby-oriented, managerial, etc.). The following chief principle is applied for typology: the community form is governed by the activity form.

- Coordination of electronic funds acquisition, collections of different subject and specific scopes (Moshkov's library, program Museums of Russia, a unity of collectors of audio and video funds, the virtual students' clubs, etc.).

Division in relations between members of communication can be selected as a ground for classification of the virtual communication. In one case it will be people acquainted with each other in real life or the virtual medium. Virtual communication continues and supplements bonds originally emerged in the traditional communication. In other cases bonds formed in the virtual medium are primary since people do not know each other in real life. «In the virtual communication a person has an opportunity to contact with people unlikely to be met in real life. In accordance with the conducted investigations the number of social contacts for a person successfully adapted to the virtual community considerably rises» (Ignatyev et al., 2003, p. 20).

A virtual community may have any status. The following classification can be observed as an example of their typification under the principle of geographic location:

1. local virtual communities;
2. regional virtual communities;
3. national virtual communities;
4. transnational (global) virtual communities.

Resume

Hence, the virtual community can be defined as a specific commonality of individuals linked with the computer-mediated communication featured by certain standards of steadiness and conditioning formation of a system of the target

collective and individual actions. Consolidation of forces directed to handle professional, research, educational, avocational needs and interests in the virtual medium results in production of a subspace with its typical technological, psychological; and social characteristics. The virtual communities distinguished by rules of the interpersonal relationship, value foundations impose more dramatic effect on real spheres of the social interaction.

Point

Implementation of new communication tools leads to conversion of the professional communication channels. The newly divided groups come out of the flexible information technologies. New spheres of professional exchange and cooperation come forth within the network space. For example, web-site of an institute of higher education constitutes the corporative medium with common ideology, professional standard, alike methods in settlement of the business problems. In many countries activity of the virtual communities as a corporative resource is systematically supported. Special programs to settle problems of effective interaction of the virtual and real communication systems are worked out. What is the interest to the matter provoked by? Apparently, the main advantage is connected with a potential to widen the corporative efforts in most different spheres.

Example

Many examples demonstrate that such a potential really exists. It evolves owing to a more flexible communication system in the society. «The professional sphere is one of the main field in which application of new tools for the information exchange resulted in deep restructure of most of technological processes, operations, methods» (Patsiorski et al., 2003, p. 59).

Communications established in the virtual communities can have formal or informal nature. The first communication level is oriented towards the business formalities. Here the priority is set to the strict protocol formalities and punctual compliance with all the requirements of the business custom. The informal communication permits reflecting the common human interests and not following so strictly the accepted norms in communication. The informal communication gives more freedom for the human creativity and the emotional background in discussion of a problem. Let us consider structures and channels of communication used to communicate in the virtual communities of scientific and educational sphere.

The virtual communities are formed around three basic objects of communication: science collections, research themes, and personnel. In new environment competition against the science teams, science and educational complexes is aggravated. New forms of the grouped cooperation are formed around the up-to-date communication technologies. The real collective bonds are enlarged with the virtual tools of interaction. This causes alteration in structure of communication channels in the field of science and education. Free discussion of science and educational problems lead via the Network fosters establishment of new collective bonds, new forms of cooperation and interaction. The majority of faculties, sub-faculties and laboratories have electronic addresses that guarantee prompt information exchange, free communication with representatives of different entities around the world.

Resume

Hence, the virtual and real bonds founded within the science and educational sphere supplement each other, broadening conditions for active cooperation among scientists, the magistral

staff, post-graduates, students, university entrants. The increased interest to interdisciplinary segments on the ground of open communication links of the network space has been observed in different science and educational complexes. The informal unity of scientists makes it possible to form a unique combination of scientists which is no longer observable in the traditional science and educational system. In so doing, not only production of an innovation product, but also

the increased competitive ability is gambled on in the «interprofessional and interdisciplinary consolidation» (Ignatyev et al., 2003). Flexibility of the communication bonds in these conditions becomes one of success components. It is the most problematic for the geographically distributed collectives for which email, teleconferences, forums, specialized chats are the only acceptable forms of interaction in their joint science and educational efforts.

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